

Acts 6:8-7:16

Gospel Proclamation (Part 1)—The Promise

Ryan Perz – January 12, 2020

Intro: There is a verse from our passage last week that I think can really help us understand what Acts is all about. Ps 115:3—“Our God is in the heavens, and he does all that he pleases.”

- As we get reoriented to Acts again, keep that in mind, since it helps summarize the book. Acts is not mainly about the apostles, or even missions. Acts is about Jesus exalted, and what he does from his exalted place.

That key to what Jesus does is gospel advancement. He builds his church.

- Yet there are various aspects of how the Gospel Advances

—With power (1:8)

—By proclamation: Why does the church still value dearly the preached Word? Because it's God's chosen way to advance the gospel.

—Through pressure and persecution; (Acts 14:22) “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”

—With perseverance

Even after suffering, the church does not quit. Jesus does not quit. He still reigns.

As we march our way through Acts, keep in mind these two ideas. Pray over them. Meditate. Take them seriously and see how they change our view of reality.

1. Jesus Reigns. He is in control all of the time.
2. What is my role? What part do I play? God has not called us to sit on the sidelines on our hands....but actively invest our lives in the kingdom.

Our main character Stephen, the first martyr, knew Jesus reigns (7:56), and he knew his role.

The man who proclaims (8-15)

- Stephen was called to deacon service (6:5), yet his passion was the ministry of the Word.
1. He is empowered (v8) —Full of grace and power; his wisdom and spirit could not be withstood (v10).
- It's empowerment that matters most. The text does not highlight Stephen's personality, or that he was Alpha male, or his platform (his platform was handing elderly women food).

It's Spirit empowerment that made the man.

2. He is opposed (9-14) —The initial opposition came as Stephen evangelizes in the Synagogue of the Freedmen (apparently made up of freed slaves from various cities); the opposition was intense enough to convene the Jewish court.
3. He is set-apart/holy (v15) — “face of an angel”; Both Moses's face and Jesus radiated at Sinai and the Mt. of Transfiguration. Both were mouthpieces and messengers of God who carried his glory with them.

This does not suggest his face would make a nice Hallmark Card. He was radiantly different.

- Why? Stephen did not see the temple, law, Moses as taking on the prominent role. That spot was reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ alone. This made him different.

One thing: Christians can become distracted with “lesser things” —and lose sight that it's all about Christ.

When our lives are all about Christ, we will be different. We will not be ordinary men and women, and neither will the message we have. Christ calls his people to be different. Peculiar. But only in a way that reflects his glory.

The message proclaimed (7:1-16)

- Now this message was been described by one scholar as “The most dense web of OT material in the NT”.
- My goal is to try not to get tangled.
- Now this is not a normal sermon in a sense. Stephen was not invited—he was arrested.
- This is a trial before the high priest—probably Caiaphas—the same high priest Jesus stood before.

- He is being charged with speaking against God and Moses “v11” (law and temple)

His response is really a defense of God. Stephen has been looked at as the first Christian apologist. He is giving a defense of the faith.

- ESV Heading “Stephen’s Speech” —misleading

Men whose faces radiate with angelic glow do not give speeches!

They proclaim a God of glory!!

The starting point (fitting for apologetics): God has made himself known.

(v2) The God of glory appeared.

- **Abraham (1-8)**

- His point is to make a defense that he’s not speaking against the temple, law, Moses. His teaching is not anti-semitic, but the fulfilling of God’s purposes.
- So, he begins with Abraham.
- We see how there are 3 primary ways that God deals with Abraham: Calling, Promise, and Covenant.

The God who calls (v3)—This God of glory calls. He initiates. He pursues. If we have even the remotest draw towards God, it’s because he has drawn us.

- This was very true for Abraham. Not a Yahweh God worshiper; he lived in southern Iraq.
- Yet God called him.
- Rom 4:17 describes this: “the God in whom he (Abraham) believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
- *Calling is bringing something into existence that did not exist. That’s a great way to understand calling.*

At one time Abraham’s relationship with God did not exist. God appeared. He called.

- Abraham’s call offers something unique—move, relocation.

It's when we pull up all of our human rootedness that we have to depend on God the most. That's what repentance is—pulling up every human root (self-effort) and throwing ourselves at God's grace for all things.

It's also how God often calls us to seeing him. Pulling up the human rootedness...*calling us to go somewhere, do something, that we will need to depend on him for all things.*

Apply: Any response to God's calling leads to two things: faith and "worship" (v7)

How do we know if we are called? Not by some standardized test, *but the desire to worship.*

Worship is not limited to piping out some tunes, it's the embrace of our whole existence (Rom 12:1) — presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

The God who Promises (v5)—If we were to boil down how God's calling worked in Abraham, it's through promise. God promised to bless Abraham: a promised Land; promised offspring that would turn into kingdoms.

- Rom 4 shows that faith is always anchored to a promise:

²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

What promises of God do you lean on? Which ones strengthen your faith the most?

For me, it's verses like this: "...No condemnation for those in Christ..." (Rom 8:1) .

Are you fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised?

Our Christian life either suffers or becomes stronger based on what we do with the promises of God.

The God who makes covenants (v8)— The covenants provide the structure of the Bible. They are critical in knowing God and his promises;

This is really important because it's easy for people to create a version of how they think God relates based on what they *feel*.

Covenant Def: "A chosen (elected) relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other."
(Tom Schreiner, Covenant)

- Covenants have a mark/sign. For Abraham and his descendants, it's circumcision.
- It's important to note here that the Covenant of Promise comes before entering the land, giving of the law, or building the temple.
- It's helpful to see the progress of God's covenants, and they build on each other.

After the first covenant was broken by Adam in the Garden

God makes one with Noah: preservation

God makes one with Abraham: Promise built on a place and people, specifically on offspring.

The later covenants God makes with nation (Moses) and David, also build on this initial covenant with Abraham.

- The sign of the covenant is circumcision (v8)

Side note: This is how our friends who baptize infants justify the practice. They see a continuity between the old and new. Since Israel applied the sign of the covenant to infants, by inference, can't Christians apply baptism? Other passages in Acts helps answer that question.

Yet in scripture, we often see that what is done outwardly means little, if there is not inward transformation.

What really matters is what goes on in the *heart*.

(Jer 4:4)

⁴ Circumcise yourselves to the Lord;

remove the foreskin of your hearts,

(Rom 2:28-29)

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

This sign of circumcision foreshadows something much greater: The Heart Transformation of the Holy Spirit—regeneration; being born again (Col 2:11)

- **Joseph (9-16)**

- The focus now shifts to The Patriarchs, and particularly Joseph. Two essential things stand out about Joseph—God’s presence in his life, and his providence and work.

A main point in Stephen’s preaching is to show how God’s presence is everywhere—not just in the temple.

God’s Presence (v9)

- Joseph’s story finalizes the book of Genesis.
- V9 highlights the fact that God was with Joseph (cf. Gen 39)

Gen 39 is often taught as a text to help men flee sexual temptation.

What frames it is this: *God was with Joseph (Gen 39:2, 23).*

Men, there are many common-sense guards to put in place to avoid the trap of sexual sin. Accountably. The Billy Graham Rule. But one exceeds them all...the presence of God.

Being Spirit-filled men who, by the power and wisdom of the Spirit are *constantly watchful* and ready to *fight* and *flee* if necessary.

God’s Providence (10-16)

- These verses wrap up the story of Joseph.
- If we were to describe his ending, it would fall under the providence and preservation.

Through God’s providence—directed by evil—God preserves (saves) his people.

The ending is beautiful in Gen 50:19-21.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. “

This is also the story of the cross. The most evil and unjust actions ever taken, but God had a design for eternal blessing for his chosen ones.

So, Christ can comfort and speak kindly to us.

Conclusion:

So, what bearing does Abraham's life have on us today? Is this just a history lesson, a piece of Bible trivia?

1. God's work in Abraham was gospel work (Gal 3:8)

⁸And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." ⁹So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

The gospel is seen in the calling, promise, covenant.

2. The way Abraham finishes is the way we need to - (Heb 11:13) "These all died in faith".

Our passage ends with a funeral. It's an obituary. I embrace the ancient wisdom of a Hebrew king who says it's more sobering to go to a funeral than a wedding (Ecc 7:2).

We all will have an obituary, and maybe some type of memorial service with eulogy. Of all the things said about us, only one really counts—"These all died in faith".